

# gather

May 2014

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## WITH OUR HANDS

VOLUME 27 NUMBER 04 MAY 2014

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VOICES

## Walking in Good Company

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

### In this final Bible study

session, we meet Rahab. Writer Kay Ward tells us, “Rahab, a prostitute and innkeeper, protects two Israelite spies by hiding them on her roof, thereby gaining safety for her whole family in the battle of Jericho. She and her family become part of the people of Israel and the lineage of Jesus.”

What do we know about Rahab’s story? In “The Red Cord,” scholar Joy A. Schroeder writes, “After the city gates are closed so the spies cannot leave, Rahab extracts a promise from them. In exchange for her help, they swear to save Rahab’s household when the Israelites attack Jericho. The spies instruct her to hang a crimson cord in the window so they know which house to spare. She helps them exit through a window in the city walls, lowering them with a rope. Later, when Jericho is attacked, the Israelites keep their promise, saving Rahab and her family...”

Like Rahab, Susan Olson is referred to as the “Head of Household” in her little family. But Susan knows God is really in charge. She writes, “The IRS calls me the Head of Household, but I know better. I’m not the head, not the life force. I’m the shepherd maybe, keeping my little family from self-destruction, the best I can with the help of a herd of others on my heels... We’re all just doing what we can, trusting God and each other, and holding the wee ones from the brink.”

For many years, Anne Basye was the head of household in her family,

too, and found she had a busy life. Even after her son grew up, she continued to focus on getting stuff done. In “The Art of Not Doing,” Anne shares how she let go of living from a constant swirl of to-do lists: “I am striving less because life is carrying me beyond my striving years. The busiest, most list-driven part of my life is behind me. My 20s started in college and ended in marriage and motherhood, with many adventures in between. Now my 20-something son and his cousins are deep in the tasks of their decade. I suspect their agendas already dwarf mine. Soon, the to-do baton will pass to them....”

The stories of our days may be told to our children and their children, just as we learn about theirs. Eventually those stories get passed along and intersect and illumine other paths. This is something Martha Sterne learned by going to her high school reunion. In “Living the Postscripts,” she tells how her story connected with another girl’s in ways she didn’t understand at the time. She writes, “For each of us live stories that are postscripts to other lives, and other postscripts will follow our stories as well. It helps to know that. I am telling you my reunion story. I imagine I am a postscript to Brenda’s reunion story. I like to think I am. I hope you will tell your stories, too.”

With this issue we finish our study on “Good Company.” It has been a joy to walk with the biblical women, Kay Ward, and you, dear readers. 🌿  
**Kate Sprutta Elliott** is editor of *Gather*.





VE US THIS DAY

## Hope Hidden

Heather Villa

Three billion people in the world struggle to survive on less than \$2 a day. Children living in the United States who earn \$10 per week allowance fall into the top 78 percent richest people in the world.

One day while my daughter and her friend sat at our kitchen table coloring, I overheard my daughter's friend announce, "I don't know any poor people."

But that's not true.

I recently realized my family's annual income dips slightly below the U.S. poverty line so we joined nearly 16 percent of other Americans.

If you're an acquaintance, you won't realize my family subsists day to day. Our poverty is invisible to the others around us.

My husband and I decline dinner invitations to restaurants, shop for our clothes at second-hand stores, and own one car. But we know how to make pizza crust from scratch and grow blueberries in our backyard. Plus, for entertainment our family regularly visits the public library, plays board games, and spends a lot of our free time outside.

You may not agree with my husband who quit his corporate job without another job lined up to pursue teaching. Those close to us know the right questions to ask and aren't afraid to ask the tough ones: "How are you really doing?" "Do you need anything?"

Amazingly, sometimes people who struggle more than we do, offer us more encouragement than anyone.

We've survived our experience partly

because we were savers. But the real reason we survive is because of all the others who come along side of us as Christ's hands. For almost a year, someone anonymously paid our electrical bill. Family members and neighbors leave fresh produce on our doorstep and others send us care packages through the mail.

One friend calls us modern pioneers because of our attempt at self-sufficiency. Historically, pioneers traveled in groups. Our journey is solitary much of the time. We really don't know where we're headed. The journey has been much longer than we anticipated. I never thought something like this could happen to my family. We now understand the true meaning of grace and hope. I believe our financial situation is temporary, because our faith is eternal.

Recently an onslaught of new emotions surfaced. I started to experience envy. That's almost more humiliating to admit than living below the U.S. poverty level. Perhaps jealousy is a byproduct of economics. I do everything I can not to feel envious when others inadvertently flaunt their carefree lifestyle in front of me.

So many people probably wouldn't say certain things or act certain ways if they really knew about our situation. Poverty doesn't look a certain way or act a certain way. But God's grace is right in the middle of it all. And that's the best kind of hope imaginable. 🌿

**Heather Villa** is a freelance writer in Richland, Washington. She loves to read, hike, and bike with her husband and young daughter. She attends Columbia Community Church with her family.



# THIRSTING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

by Nancy Goldberger



"Mom!" came the call from the next room, "I'm thirsty. Would you bring me a drink of water?" I put down the laundry and walk to the kitchen. A moment later one hand cups my daughter's face, and with the other, I hand her the requested glass of water. She thanks me with a smile.

I am constantly aware that my hands are integral to my daily life. I use my hands to make a living, support my colleagues with a pat on the back, prepare food, help with homework, drive to practice, cheer for the home team, and tuck my child into bed at the end of a day. Providing something for my family that not only quenches a need, but is also appreciated, brings me great joy.

We are an active family. In addition to school and work, we engage in a variety of sports and enjoy working around the house. It is not uncommon for one of us to ask for a glass



## LIFE-GIVING ELIXIR

This life-giving elixir that we take for granted is not so accessible to our sisters and brothers around the world. Drink in these facts about water use and access ([www.water.org](http://www.water.org)).

- Today, 780 million people do not have ready access to clean water. That is more than 2.5 times the population of the United States.
- An American taking a five-minute shower uses more water than the average person in a developing country slum uses in a day.
- Each year, 3.4 million people die from a water-related disease. That's almost the entire city of Los Angeles.

water in the midst of these activities. We drink water with our meals, and we know the importance of staying hydrated throughout our day. For us, it is second nature to have ready access to clean, refreshing water.

Even as I write these words, I am struck by our good fortune. Most of the people I know were born in places where the simple request for a glass of water is easily fulfilled. Most of us don't think twice about turning on the tap or cracking open an ice-cold bottle of water to quench our thirst.

### Equal or hurt?

When I first became aware of the issues surrounding water, I educated myself so I could make responsible decisions. What started to concern me is that my

hands, which I was using to help myself and my family, might unknowingly be harming someone or something else. In my research I became increasingly aware of water access and how the seemingly insatiable appetite for bottled water in the United States is contributing to mass consumption of natural resources and to the mountains of waste piling up around the world.

It is possible for each and every one of us to make small changes that can lead to a significant and positive impact for our planet and its inhabitants.

### Making a difference

In addition to being more mindful about the water I use (drinking, showers, lawn care, laundry) and the water used to produce my food, I also need to start supporting programs that help bring fresh water to places that are in desperate need. That may seem like a big order to fill, but it is easier than one might imagine. Visit the ELCA, Lutheran World Relief, and water websites to start exploring

ways you can respond. (See sidebar on p. 9 for more information.)

Six years ago, I made a decision to purchase a home filtration system for our drinking water. It's a simple system that helps provide drinking water for our family that is a bit cleaner than the tap water that flows through the city system.

Previously we purchased bottled water. We had the big bottles that sat on a dispenser for home use and small bottles for on the go. The motivation for the switch stemmed from my growing awareness not only about where the bottled water came from, but the effect of empty plastic bottles on the environment. To help make this a sustainable change, I taught my daughter why these changes were important for us today and



everyone in the future. I calculated the number of plastic bottles that we've stopped using since our change. After six years with our water system, a conservative number is about 6,570. (One bottle a day times three people for six years.) That is about 275 pounds of plastic we've kept out of the garbage dump.

### At what cost?

When I started thinking about the impact of drinking bottled water, it did not take long for me to realize that a \$1 bottle of water comes with a significantly higher cost. The science-focused website [www.phys.org](http://www.phys.org) states that "[s]ince world consumption of bottled water has increased by 70 percent since 2001 to 53 billion gallons in 2007, some people have become concerned about the environmental, economical, and social impacts of bottled water" (<http://phys.org/news156506896.html>).

In a recent study, researchers estimated that it requires up to 2,000 times the energy to produce bottled water verses using tap water. That includes the energy required to "manufacture plastic, fabricate the plastic into bottles, process the water, fill and seal the bottles, transport the bottles, and chill the bottles for use." That was a huge wake-up call for me.

My daughter educates me as well. The other day she came into my home office and plunked down a copy of *National Geographic for Kids*. "Look," she said, pointing to an article titled "Drinking Water: Bottled or From the Tap?" The article shared a lot of information about what it takes to produce a plastic bottle. It included this interesting tidbit: "Americans buy more bottled water than any other nation in the world, adding 29 billion water bottles a year to the problem. In order to make all these bottles, manufacturers use 17 million barrels of crude oil. That's enough oil to keep a million cars going for 12 months. Imagine a water bottle filled a quarter of the way up with oil. That's about how much oil was needed to produce the bottle."

### A sea of change

Part of maintaining the filtration system includes cleaning it. This, my friends, is a labor of love. As thrilled as I am that we have reduced our water footprint in this way, the effort required translates into a good hour of my time one Saturday each month. The cleaning ritual involves draining the tank, disassembling the system, and meticulously cleaning every nook and cranny until it looks like new.

What at first seemed like drudgery has transformed into a time of thoughtful meditation. As I stand at the sink, my thoughts regularly turn to other issues around water. Sometimes I am transported back in time to when I stayed at the humble home of a family in El Salvador. I can still see my hosts, Julio and Dora Garcia and their seven children, gathered around a stream of water that springs from the ground nearby. I recall how thankful they are for the fresh water that gurgles and bubbles from the ground.

This stream, Dora tells me, is a tremendous blessing. "We are so fortunate," she says to me. "Our lives would be very different without this water."

This source of clean water allows them to cook, drink, and wash dishes and clothes without having to haul water across the mountainous terrain from a distant well. That trip broadened my perspective and taught lessons that helped me put my faith into action.

More recently, my meditation time has turned to thoughts of water privatization. Specifically the concerns from companies claiming ownership of the water source and using that ownership to determine who gets access (by purchasing water, bottled or otherwise). This water issue was raised for me by the Student Environmental Alliance (SEA) at Loyola University Chicago where I work. At the heart of SEA's concern is the question: "Is water a human right?" Since water is necessary for human existence, it seems to me like the answer is yes.



There is a battle raging on this issue. Many of those arguing for the privatization of water are, perhaps to no one's surprise, large corporations who stand to make a great deal of money. The students involved in SEA have taken the matter not only to heart, but also to their own hands and up the chain of command. The university backed the initiative and removed all bottled water from campus, providing recyclable, refillable water bottles to all incoming students. Free refilling stations have also been installed across the two lakeside campuses.

What kind of impact can this change make? Considering that there are over 20,000 students currently enrolled, this is more than a drop in the bucket; it's more like a tidal wave of social justice. I am inspired by the actions of these students. I am pleased to participate in their efforts by engaging in sustainable practices. I am encouraged by this generation's care for the planet and their care for others.

All this talk of water has made me thirsty. I lift my glass of water to each of you who work to make positive change, big or small. Thank you for using your hands, hearts, faith, and actions for healing. 🌿

Ancy Goldberger works at Loyola University Chicago.

## FIND OUT MORE AND GET INVOLVED

### Women of the ELCA

This water stewardship resource can be used as a personal or group mini retreat: [www.womenoftheelca.org/resource-being-good-stewards-of-water-news-22.php](http://www.womenoftheelca.org/resource-being-good-stewards-of-water-news-22.php)

### ELCA

Read more about the ELCA's involvement in the water issues: [www.elca.org/News-and-Events/blogs/ELCAWorldHunger/71](http://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/blogs/ELCAWorldHunger/71)

### Lutheran World Relief

Help deliver water in emergencies and for life-sustaining practices: [lwr.org/ourwork/water](http://lwr.org/ourwork/water)

### UN World Water Day

International Water Day focuses on fresh water and sustainable management of resources: [www.unwater.org/worldwaterday](http://www.unwater.org/worldwaterday)

### Water for the World

A great resource for water facts and ways to get involved to make a change for the better: <http://water.org>

### National Geographic for Kids

An easy-to-understand article about bottled water versus tap for middle-schoolers on up: <http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/kids/> and search for "drinking water."

### Water Footprint

Discover the size of your water footprint: [www.waterfootprint.org](http://www.waterfootprint.org) and click on your water footprint.

### Mayo Clinic

This site provides information on the health benefits of water and guides for intake: [www.mayoclinic.com/health/water/NU00283](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/water/NU00283)

### United States Geological Survey

How much water is there on, on, and above our big, blue planet? <http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/earthhowmuch.html>

### Phys.org

Phys.org publishes approximately 100 quality articles every day, offering some of the most comprehensive coverage of science-tech developments world-wide: <http://phys.org/news156506896.html>





EARTH WISE

## Green Thumbs & Dirty Fingernails

by Terry L. Bowes

The term “green thumb” has its basis in reality. For generations, gardeners have “deadheaded” their flowering plants by pinching off the spent blooms. As a consequence, the plant can create new blossoms. Rose growers know that they will achieve the best outcomes for their roses by pinching off the side buds. The result is that the single bud left grows large and gorgeous. The result on the gardener is, you guessed it, thumbs stained green.

Of course, anyone who is a successful gardener is described as having a green thumb. One thing I’ve learned over the years is that a green thumb is made, not born. It is earned from hours of dirty fingernails and failed first attempts. It is earned by determination and optimism.

The first year that I tried starting seeds in the sunroom, I met with dismal failure. Goodness knows that I invested time and money on that failed crop. I returned in defeat to the Rocky Mountain Seed Company from which I had purchased the seeds. A visit to the Rocky Mountain Seed Company was like making a journey back in time. The RMSC had provided seeds to farmers and small gardeners since the 1920s. Seeds were stored in custom made oak seed cabinets with various sizes of drawers and bins and sold to farmers in bulk.

I sat at the old counter on an aged stool and humbly asked for help and advice. The knowledgeable woman who stood in front of me listened to my tale of woe, occasionally asking pertinent

questions. When I was through, she sympathetically explained to me that the only thing I had done right was to purchase my seeds at the Rocky Mountain Seed Company. Everything I had done after that was wrong. I had planted the seeds in potting soil instead of seed starting soil. I should have planted them in peat pots instead of the plastic containers I had recycled from previous plants. I hadn’t watered them enough. The unheated sunroom was too cold at night for the seeds to germinate.

I returned home bearing all the right supplies and stubbornly started over. Ten days later I celebrated the emergence of sprouts. Since then I have had great success starting my own plants in the sunroom.

Since then, too, the Rocky Mountain Seed Company has gone out of business as farming has changed from family farms to gigantic agribusiness conglomerates. We are just now beginning to comprehend how that takeover affects the way we live and eat. The growth and success of local farmers’ markets point to our renewed appreciation for the work of the hands of farmers. Those farmers do not see one another as competitors but as partners in growing good food.

My husband, Steve, grew up on his family’s small dairy farm in Kansas. His daily schedule and those of his parents revolved around feeding and milking 40 cows every morning and every evening.

I grew up as an Army brat, waking up every morning to the energetic trumpet blare of Reveille and went to sleep



very night to the mournful strains of  
aps. It never occurred to me to wonder  
here the milk in the post commissary  
me from. God must have had an  
active hand in bringing two such polar  
opposites together in a partnership that  
as now lasted for more than 47 years.  
We have learned a lot from one another  
that time.

When we were first married, I was  
so young and ignorant to appreciate  
the bottles of fresh milk Steve's mother  
brought when she visited. She had cared  
for the cows, helped milk them, and  
pasteurized the milk by carefully heating  
on the stove. The milk (topped with  
heavy cream!) was indeed a selfless gift.

As my mother-in-law aged, her hands  
were afflicted by arthritis. She said to me  
once, "My hands are all gnarly. I've just  
worked them too hard." By then, I had  
grown up enough to appreciate the work  
of the hands of others rather than being  
so self-absorbed in my own.

Next to the green thumb are four  
fingers with dirt imbedded in their nails.  
Some of that soil is from planting seeds  
or pulling weeds. Some also comes from  
planting seedlings purchased from the  
local greenhouse.

After I thump the bottom of the pot  
to release that petunia, I "rough up" the  
roots. I tear into the root ball so that  
the root system is freed to stretch its  
legs rather than continue to grow in an  
impotent ball. Then I grit my teeth and  
snatch off the blooms that seduced me  
in the greenhouse. Gardening can be a  
rough sport.

Scientists have observed that chil-  
dren who grow up on farms are less sus-  
ceptible to allergies and other illnesses.  
That may be due in part to sunshine and  
fresh air, but contact with the soil plays  
a huge role. Children raised in homes  
focused on dirt avoidance miss out on  
a lot of immunity as well as a lot of  
fun. From the time she was a child, my  
daughter Missy has loved the emergence  
of the spinach in late spring. She picks  
a leaf and shakes it two or three times  
before she eats it. That is her idea of  
cleaning the green. Missy is nauseatingly  
healthy. That reinforces my conviction  
that we need to feel the soil, smell it, and  
swallow a bit to stay healthy.

Dirt is beautiful. And so are dirty  
fingernails. 🌿

**Terry L. Bowes** and her husband, Steve, raised  
three kids and dozens of Quarter horses for 25  
years in Colorado. When their three grandchildren  
were born, Terry became a professional grand-  
mother, serving as their child-care provider. Terry  
and Steve downsized from a 20-acre farm to six  
acres, keeping three horses for the kids. Terry  
served as interim executive director of Women of  
the ELCA from 1996–1997.







## THE ART OF DOING NOT

When I turned 50, a friend asked me what

I'd like from life in the years to come.

I'd like to strive less, I said.

How she laughed! She knew that when it came to striving,

I was a champion, armed with a world-class to-do list.

Shortly after the alarm rang in the morning, action items started elbowing their way into my mind. A note under the coffee pot detailed early-morning calls and meetings. On the desk sat a comprehensive list of birth- days to remember, bills to pay, deadlines to meet. Post-it notes guided me through trips to the grocery store.





by Anne Basye

Whatever needed remembering before bed went onto that scrap of paper by the coffee pot . . . and another day of *do, do, do* would skid to a close. If this sounds familiar, it's because as North Americans, you and I share an intense belief in the virtue of productivity. How can we help it, when aphorisms from Benjamin Franklin to Nike goad us on? "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." "A stitch in time saves nine." "Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today." "Just do it!" Striving, achieving, and being productive are tenets of our national civil religion. You can hear its echo in our faith lives too. (God's work, our hands!) Constant *doing* is easy to measure, and it can make us feel good.

You know that little jolt of satisfaction that comes from meeting a deadline? Some days I just couldn't get enough—even when my list was absolutely overwhelming me.

My wish to lay it all aside came shortly after a friend responded to my exhaustive, exhausted litany of commitments with, "Anne, if you want your gravestone to say 'She got it all done,' I'll support that. But might there be another way?"

### The dark side of doing

Instead of devoting myself to my task list, suggested my friend, why not don a black beret, take a notebook to the corner café, and get back to writing poetry? It was a tempting notion, but the idea of relaxing a little, or at least relaxing my grip on my to-do list, was scary. If what I did defined who I was . . . what would happen if I didn't do it?

Would I slide from upright citizen to deadbeat in record time?

On the other hand, "She got it all done" was not a compelling epitaph.

A tiny crack had penetrated my worldview. It hit me that my to-do list was my primary lens on life, shaping how I approached everything and everyone, all day long. Watching myself go through my days, I could see how my complicated agenda built a wall between me and everyone else. On one side, me, my important concerns, and my desperate sense that it was all up to me! On the other side, the rest of the world. It made me a little lonely. What it was doing to people around me was worse.

Focused only on getting stuff done, I often turned people into instruments for accomplishing my goals. Instead of "How's your mom? What happened after you met with your boss last week? Is your little boy feeling better?" I zeroed in on "What can you do to help me get this task done?" I raced through social niceties to get to my point faster. I did not welcome feedback



or questions from others. In the office, when perfectly nice people made perfectly reasonable requests of me at really stressful moments, I often crossed my hands in front of my face, as if fending off an attacker.

Striving was making me rude and impatient. It was reducing my relationships to transactions. Giving up striving was not really about doing less. It would require more than simply clearing my calendar and laying down my to-do list. What I was yearning for, what I needed to learn, was a different way to be in the world.

### First steps in being

*Being* is not a synonym for *doing nothing*. Both the Bible verse “Be still and know that I am God” and the story of Mary and Martha suggest that *being* takes concentration, attention, and above all, a willingness to open oneself to God and God’s people.

Surrounded by people as busy as me, how could I cultivate these qualities? How could a doer like me master the skills of being?

One source of wisdom was people who weren’t under the spell of insane productivity. Working with missionaries, I heard many tales of transformation through hospitality: how well-intentioned, outcome-focused North Americans had learned from new neighbors to slow down, linger over meals and greetings, and gradually put relationships ahead of tasks.

“Don’t just do something, stand there!” missionaries repeated, as they explained how cross-cultural living had reordered their values.

Closer to home, my models were my son’s grandparents. When Alex and I ate with his dad’s parents, their talent for just being was evident. Once supper was over and the plates were cleared, the four of us would sit at the table and talk. No lists, no deadlines, no TV, no restless multitasking—my in-laws were content to sit quietly, listening to Alex as he shared anecdotes and feelings that, all too often, were news to me.

No surprise there! When his grandparents asked

“how’s school” they sincerely wanted to know. Their question put Alex first. When I asked “how’s school,” I was fishing for logistics like homework and field trips. My to-do list came first. No longer responsible for facilitating anyone’s childhood, my in-laws had no agenda at all. In the light of their patient, gracious appreciation, Alex, the grade-school student, could shine.

Recently, Alex, the graduate student, visited my parents after presenting a paper at an academic conference. “Read your paper to us,” they insisted. From the relatively comprehensible first paragraph, the paper plunged quickly into the deep waters of philosophy. My parents smiled proudly and lovingly through the densest passages.

Like those long-term missionaries, grandparents learn how to value being over doing. In an insane world, they create oases of being where time runs a little more slowly and the main concern is people, not tasks. I had entered these spaces myself, in mom-and-tot groups and cooperative playgroups when Alex was very young. Slowing to a toddler’s pace and singing endless stanzas of “The Wheels on the Bus” made my agenda seem unimportant, even silly. The same thing happened when I visited my elderly neighbor in his senior building, where that same spirit of leisure and kindness was abundant.

These unhurried, gentle spaces were missing from my midlife years of earning, planning, and parenting. Could I discover or create more small spaces where I too could just be? Or at least recapture that spirit?

### Darkness, candles, breath

About this time, the quiet, meditative, Taize style of worship began to emerge in my city. The first time I attended, I was swept up in a cloud of being. With a thousand other people, I lost myself in the music, chants, and readings. Kneeling around the icons at the altar, I lit a candle and prayed for a long, long time.

Until I discovered Taize, church had been all about



ing. Rarely was I a mere worshipper. No, that was substituting on the organ, singing in the choir, assisting at communion, or writing the prayers. During a long stretch between pastors, our small urban church relied on the talents of its lay members, and I was a utility player. Church duties from preparing the bulletins to organizing vacation Bible school were mine for several years.

What a relief to discover in Taizé a beautiful space and a simple liturgy that invited my participation instead of pleading for my leadership. It was a place where I could step away from all that doing that kept me locked up in my own head and open my whole body to the enormous mystery of God's vast love and grace that lay beyond my small concerns.

Hands unclenched, head bowed, I wondered what God might have in mind for me. It was good to kneel. Like the yoga position called child's pose—resting on the floor, folded over my knees, arms stretched out in front of me, hands at rest—kneeling was a gesture of submission. A physical reminder that God was in charge, not me and my list!

### Let go, let go, let go

Some seven years have passed since I said I wanted to quit striving.

My *aha* moment was a wakeup call, not a conversion experience. I didn't go cold turkey. My bad habits were not miraculously lifted from me.

I still make lists. I'm just a little better at keeping them in their place. I understand now that to-do lists and agendas are a tool, not a mandate. Something outside me, not part of me. And above all, not something divinely ordained!

When I feel the urge to run over somebody with my agenda, I summon the grandparents and missionaries. Channeling their talent for presence, I take a deep breath, open my hands, wiggle my toes, and remember that people are more valuable than any task they might

do for me. Instead of obsessing about my list all night, I try to turn it over to God for safekeeping at the end of the day, remembering that the surprises God has in store will never make the list.

And my new mantra makes me laugh out loud: *Relax. Nothing is under control!*

Age is also helping.

Without trying to do so, I am striving less—because life is carrying me beyond my striving years. The busiest, most list-driven part of my life is behind me. My 20s started in college and ended in marriage and motherhood, with many adventures in between. Now my 20-something son and his cousins are deep in the tasks of their decade. I suspect their agendas already dwarf mine.

Soon, the to-do baton will pass to them, and it will be my turn to urge them to linger after supper while I grill their children about their days.

And when they write my epitaph, it won't be "She got it all done." 🌸

Anne Basye practices doing less in rural Mount Vernon, Wash.

### A Prayer for Doing Less

May we be still, God.

Instead of doing, doing, doing,

may we just be,

open to You,

open to loved ones,

open to strangers,

ready to listen with hearts uncluttered

by tasks and anxieties,

ready to accept others as gift, not instrument,

ready to root our actions in relationship

with You and your children

around us.

Amen.



## Hearing the Cries by Roger A. Willer

As you read this today, more people are in U.S. prisons as a percentage of the population than in any other country on earth, including those with comparable crime rates. The

For these reasons the 2007 Churchwide Assembly determined that the ELCA should address the social question of the U.S. criminal justice system. The task took five years of study, conversation, and discernment resulting in the adoption of the 12th ELCA social teaching statement, *The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries*, at the 2013 Churchwide Assembly.

Notably, the teaching statement was adopted 882-25, that is, a vote of 96.7 percent in favor. This overwhelming affirmation suggests the growing awareness within our church of the problems and came after thoughtful deliberation about the prophetic and controversial social positions in the statement on massive incarceration, private prisons, racism, and the failed juvenile justice approach.

Even a quick look at the basic outline (see the website listed in the upper-right box) suggests how big and complex the issues are. Fortunately, the statement itself has a new feature: a brief overview of the main points right on the first page.

United States spends \$60 billion every year for corrections alone and yet many who work in the system feel stressed to the breaking point. People of color and people living in poverty are disproportionately harmed by problems within the system. Most tellingly, you probably were not aware of any of this. Most people are not.





with a guide to finding each section. As a result it's not hard to identify the main points in the statement for yourself. What this introduction can do is highlight several takeaways or key messages.

The opening paragraph has already suggested the first message. **"Listen and learn!"** The U.S. criminal justice system is so deeply flawed that it harms those who work in it, those imprisoned by it, and others—such as family members or victims—who are impacted by it. In assessing the current system, the ELCA gives thanks for the U.S. system's principles and commitment to justice. This church also recognizes many in the system who serve their professional vocations with competent and humane performance. Yet, the extent of the failures and flaws are largely invisible to most people. Unheeded cries are being ignored.

The statement, then, first calls Christians to confession. That is, it calls us as individuals and in our common life together to recognize we have not been listening and often have fallen short in respond-

ing to crime's harm and to problems in the justice system. At a deeper level, this statement recognizes that we must transform our thinking about criminal justice. It calls for a transformed mindset, one that counteracts political talk equating more punitive measures with more just ones. Such an altered perspective challenges current undertones of vengeance, violence, and racism. It encourages everyone in the criminal justice system to be seen as members of human communities, created in the image of God, and worthy of appropriate and compassionate response. The second message then is: **"let your mind be changed by God's call for justice"** (Micah 6:8).

### God's justice

Among two or three key theological underpinnings, is the long-standing Lutheran idea of God's interrelated twofold care for human beings. The Bible teaches that God's wants society to flourish, but because of sin, God must work that out with two distinct strategies of care. There is

*When we live with the cross of Christ as our guide, we move toward identification with the people we are serving, whether the victim, the criminal, or the justice-system worker.*



both the church's ministry (gospel) and society's institutions (law) and both require our participation.

Using Scripture, this social statement lifts up a vision of God's justice for society that is richer and deeper than what we see around us. Motivated by this vision, yet aware that we live in a world of sin, Christians are guided by a holy yearning for seeking that kind of justice.

However, people of faith do not presume to have special revelations about how to shape a justice system. So, the statement urges the development, implementation, and assessment of criminal justice procedures and criminal law using reason- and evidence-based practices. It also laments the absence of critical reasoning in many areas of the system. We might say, then, the third take-away is: **"Look in the biblical mirror but seek reform based on data about what works in today's world."**

The statement has dozens of data-filled footnotes, but it is not necessary to read them all to get the point. The statement spends lots of ink describing what kind of reforms will make the system more just, based on the data.

Evidence points to the need for greater emphasis on victims' rights and needs, use of restorative justice, community-based alternatives to incarceration, legislation that reduces sentences for certain offenses, the emergence of specialized courts, and the support of re-entry programs.

The fourth message is pivotal: **"reduce mass incarceration,"** and it urges those who vote and those who make and administer correctional policies to do so via three specific paths:

- pursue alternatives to incarceration,
- reform sentencing laws and policies, and
- scrutinize national drug policy.

Other reforms are needed also. Four general areas in particular require action from the public and from policy

makers. The theme here is **"Don't forget these!"**

- the criminal justice system should acknowledge the disparities and address the implicit and explicit racism that persists within it;
- it should recognize the special needs of juvenile offenders;
- it should stop the privatization of prison facilities;
- it should foster the full reintegration of ex-offenders into community.

While much of the statement addresses society in general, section four specifically lifts up what Christians can do in our congregations. That message could be stated, "I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25:36), but the statement uses a different phrase: **"Seek wise responses of love"** and it unpacks four practices within a basic cross-shaped approach. The practices described are:

- *listening* with compassion
- *hospitality* to welcome the stranger (Such hospitality is profound and must be practiced with recognition of the church's care for the vulnerable in its community.)
- *accompaniment*, that is, figuratively walking together in a solidarity of interdependence and mutuality
- *becoming advocates* for those whose cries are ignored.

When we live with the cross of Christ as our guide, we move toward identification with the people we are serving, whether the victim, the criminal, or the justice-system worker. The mark of the cross as guide leaves the familiar behind and begins counting others' experience as our own.

Taking all these messages to heart, we can conclude that the statement echoes what Jesus once said in another context: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). 🌿

**The Rev. Roger A. Willer** is director for theological ethics in the ELCA office of the presiding bishop.





LET US PRAY

## Good Company: Liturgy

by Julie K. Ageson

### Over the course of this

last year, my spouse and I have had the privilege—and the challenge—of worshiping in many different communities. It comes as one of the benefits of this transition time in our lives. We *need* the weekly experience of liturgical worship, and sometimes, we've felt like hungry birds in wintertime, pecking away at frozen earth, hoping for some tiny nugget of nourishment.

We look for communities of faith that are shaped by liturgical worship. Yes, it's good to be welcomed warmly but we are longing to be welcomed to more than a community. When we worship, we are hoping to touch holiness, to experience the mystery of God, to be welcomed to Christ. We are looking for a body of people gathered to participate in an alternative way of viewing the world. We are hoping for liturgy (literally, "the work of the people") that expresses a common longing to see God's face—good company indeed.

Liturgical worship is important for Lutherans. It begins before we leave home as we prepare to honor the Sabbath and it continues when we're sent out into everyday life. Liturgy is a pattern, a ritual, an ancient format for making ourselves present to God's presence. It gives clarity and shape to the way we live.

Liturgy always is being renewed even as its form remains constant: gathering, word, meal, sending. We use this ancient *ordo* because it speaks the means of grace and draws us into a set of words and actions with universal meaning. "Wel-

come! Welcome to the love of God." "Come, let us worship God." "Now the feast and celebration, all of creation sings for joy . . ." "Jesus Christ, you are the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome . . ." "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth." "This is the feast of victory for our God!" "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again." "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world. Have mercy on us." "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world. Grant us peace."

In the liturgy, we are welcomed to Christ. We are fed, forgiven, sent into the daily routines of life surrounded by the love of Christ to share the love of Christ. Jesus comes to us in our gathering together, in the proclamation of the Word, in the meal, and in the sending. The means of grace—water, word, wine and bread—convey God's lavish and unconditional love to every starving one of us.

The liturgy is sacramental. It's a way for us to be formed into the body of Christ, to become little Christs, to bear Christ to the world. The liturgy celebrates God's presence in the most ordinary human things: birth and death, the bonds of love between parents and children, marriage, a healing touch, a shared meal.

I am grateful to be part of a liturgical church. In the good company of the liturgy, we taste and see the goodness of God. Good company indeed! 🌿

**Julie K. Ageson** retired last spring from ELCA Resource Center leadership. She and her spouse now write and travel.





## FAMILY MATTERS

# Enduring Friendships

by Elyse Nelson Winger

"We pray for the big things and forget to give thanks for the ordinary, small (and yet really not small) gifts" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*).

## The boxes were packed,

the parsonage was empty, and Martha and my mother wept. These things I knew: our neighbors were moving to Peru; they would speak Spanish (!); and they would never be coming back to Minnehaha Parkway. I would no longer visit Martha's kitchen, ever-intrigued by her pantry which was filled with unusual things like natural peanut butter and wondrous things like endless art supplies, or marvel at her boys, both with a knack for the comical, creative, and chaotic. My sister would have one less dad on the block to correctly call pastor. (She called every dad on the block—even the professed agnostic—pastor. Enough of them actually were. It was confusing for a little girl.)

These things I didn't know: the grief my mother felt in losing a dear and daily friend—and the gift of neighbors whose presence affirm the value of life together and point to the One who calls each of us into holy friendship with one another and the world.

*"To the house of a friend, the way is never long."* So read the needlepoint rendering of our sidewalk-linked red brick and brown stucco homes that Martha presented to my mother as a parting gift that Minnesota morning—a piece that would hang framed in our home

for decades to come, a delicate tribute to good neighbors and friends. And decades later, I began to understand the things I hadn't known before.

Were I adept at needlepoint (which is simply impossible to imagine), I too would have created a picture for my own dear and once-daily friend Ana: my lemon yellow foursquare and her artichoke green craftsman, each with century-old charm and endless renovations to do, each coming alive from the kitchen where weekend nights were spent round the islands, sipping Malbec, munching pita chips and hummus, recalling the delights and disasters of the week, children somewhere downstairs, outside, who knows. Though the sidewalk linking our homes was more like a full city block, still to the house of these friends, the way was never long.

Until one spring, when the job in California came—a wonderful job and with it a new season of life for Ana's whole family that I trusted would bring transformation and happiness. Yet in the meantime, a kind of grief I hadn't known before—the grief of losing a best friend, a morning companion on long trail walks with our black lab, Beau, a keeper of a home that exuded warmth and welcome for my whole family. Amidst the grief, I grasped the gift of a neighbor whose friendship indeed pointed to the One who calls us into daily life together, sharing food and time and wisdom, incarnating the way of Jesus and his friends. These are, as Bonhoeffer reminds us, "ordinary, small (and yet really not



small) gifts." And they also point to—and teach us about—the One who is Friend to each of us and all the world.

I first read Sallie McFague's *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* when I was in college. In this now-classic work of feminist theology, McFague offers fresh metaphors and names for God, rooted in Scripture and tradition yet obscured by male-centered perspectives and preferences.

The triune God can be imagined as father, son, and spirit. But God can also be imagined as mother, lover, and friend. And these metaphors pepper Scripture and theology, awaiting embodiment in our worship, our words, and our daily deeds. McFague writes:

"Solidarity friendship says We are not our own, but it also says We are not *on* our own. As a model of God's relationship with the world, it says that we do not belong to ourselves, but it also says that we are not left to ourselves. In stressing mutuality, commitment, trust, common vision, and interdependence, it denies possession but defies despair. It is a model of hope: God is with us, immanent in the world as our friend and co-worker and immanent in the community of friends called the church, which is a gathering of those committed to the vision of a healed, liberated world" (*Models of Gods*, p. 167).

By July, the boxes were packed, the house was empty, and Ana and I cried. These things I knew: Our friendship would last, but they'd never be coming back to Clinton Boulevard.

Even Beau mourned, still turning up the front steps of Ana's house for months after their departure, certain that her smiling face would greet him, too.

Two years later, our friendship endures via text, phone calls, care packages, and even visits to the California coast. I will always be thankful for the years we and our families had in such ordinary and not so small ways, and the way Ana helped me to know that we are indeed never on our own.

So tell me, dear reader, whose friendship has helped you to see God alive in the world and to better understand how God seeks to be with us and how God calls us into community together in sustaining, freeing ways?

For these and all authentic friendships, thanks be to God. ☙

**The Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger**, an ELCA pastor, serves as university chaplain at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Ill. She and husband, Stewart, have two children, Catherine and Daniel.





# Head of Household

*by Susan Olson*





"No, no, honey....Your family is in this car."

I'm still not sure if the speaker was a railroad employee or just another passenger dressed in blue. My daughter and I were trying to board the Lake Shore Limited in Chicago. She was in front with her little pink backpack. I followed her with our small mound of blankets, bags, and one suitcase. Hoisting these items up the steel staircase, even with help, was taking a little time, and my 7-year-old was anxious to get into the car, out of the bitter cold. "Go to the left," I had encouraged her, suspecting that car to have more seat-pairs than the one to the right, where most of the previous passengers had gone. "Wait for me, there, just inside the door, okay?" Obediently, she punched the black bar to open the car door on the left. And that is when the woman grabbed her arm and tried to shuttle her in the opposite direction.

I guess the woman hadn't heard me. Or if she had, hadn't connected the dots. She saw an African American family head right and assumed that my beautiful daughter belonged with them. She was trying to shepherd my child to safety, I guess.

"That's not my family," I heard my daughter say, just as I was shouting "she's mine," from the noisy platform. The bags formed a barrier between my daughter

and me, making it impossible for me to hold this conversation face to face.

"You're not alone, are you?" the blue-clad lady asked.

"No. *Mommy* is my family," she said, pointing to me.

"She's mine," I repeated. This time I was heard.

The woman flapped about a bit and left.

I got my luggage and my child into the car, found a seat and we quietly settled in for the long ride. The suitcase went on the rack overhead, along with our two coats. I placed the pink cooler under her feet for easy access, while she dressed her doll in blue penguin pajamas. She hadn't said a word to me. I knew she was still thinking about it.

"You okay, baby?"

"Yep."

"She didn't know."

"I know."

"We're a little family," I said, beginning the words we've said so often that they've become a litany.

"But a good family," she answered.

I tucked the green fleece blanket around her shoulders, nestled her doll close beside, and began reading to her as the Chicago lights winked their goodbyes beside us. When her eyelids began to droop, I closed the book, and we rode clickety-clack on,

toward Indiana, toward Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, home. I thought she'd drifted off, but then she mumbled,

"Our skins don't match,"

Our other litany. I finished it for her,

"but we love each other the most."

I kissed her smooth forehead and she smiled, and then fell asleep.



## Conspicuous Families

This is not the first time this has come up, of course, and it wouldn't be the last. Despite how dizzyingly diverse our country has become, families like mine—anything outside of typical—always seem to confuse people. The multi-racial piece is, of course the most frequently mentioned, in our case. Selam's classmates have asked about it since she was in pre-school. "How come she's Black?" they say, accosting me in the hallway before school, little gap-toothed inquisitors.

I have rehearsed answers for this, of course. One of the more helpful pre-adoption classes that I took was one called, "Conspicuous Families" which prepared me to think through answers to questions about our unexpected family makeup. When I first took the class, I had no idea how frequently I—no, we—would be approached with questions ranging from innocent to offensive.

Particularly when she was very small, we seemed to attract questions everywhere—grocery stores and churches, doctor's offices and airports. The course gave me examples of how to respond in ways that could be informational, humorous or privacy guarding. I ordinarily respond with quick facts, especially with children. Selam prefers to joke about it. "My mommy liked chocolate milk when she was pregnant," she'll say, or just deadpan, "I don't know what you mean. We look exactly alike."

Still, this does take a toll. Selam doesn't mind the questions about how we came to be a family or about race, but the comments that imply that we aren't a family—those sting. Selam hadn't done the "our skins don't match" exchange for at least a year, but it was clearly on her mind. I wish there were a way I could inoculate her from these comments. All I can do, though, is prepare her to respond, give her a pillow for landing, a harbor, a home.

## Biblical Families

I wish there had been a pre-adoption class on Conspicuous

Singleness. I've been single all my life, and never felt that this was a particularly important descriptor of me. Sure, most people that I interacted with probably knew that I was unmarried, but it wasn't a major identity of mine until I added it to the other word—*mother*. Once my tax status switched from single to head of household, I became something different in the eyes of many—the single mother—object of scorn, of pity, able to raise the ire of politicians and political commentators.

I feel quite certain that I've heard derogatory comments about single mothers all my life, but since I've become one, I seem to hear them all the time. I even found one in an older sermon of mine, from another time where I could freely throw "single mother" around as a monolithic term.

In some ways, it's not a surprise that my family is atypical. I guess I've always been drawn to the biblical stories of women in non-traditional families. Ruth and Naomi captured my imagination from early on. Hagar was a single parent under impossible conditions, and yet made a life for herself and her child. And then there's Rahab, heading a household of parents and siblings, seemingly the only one of her kin to earn a living. She boldly brokers a deal to preserve her family from harm—and is taken seriously as head of household. These women captivate me. Each of them does the things that I do, in a time with far less public support or acceptance. Each takes on non-traditional responsibility, and each has to accept help in order to protect her family, to serve as that family's head.

## Dependent Families

I'm drawn to the stories, but it is not always easy to live into their messages. Before Selam, I was able to be awfully independent. I seldom needed help, and when I did, I went to family or just hired someone to do whatever it is that I needed. I traveled with the smallest of bags; I opened my own doors, got myself to the airport, reached my own high shelves. I was so proud



my independence, so proud of my ability to do it all myself. I was self-sufficient, a small island.

I can't do that anymore. I have to accept offers of help where they come. You want to invite my daughter on the third play-date in a row that I haven't yet reciprocated? I'll agree. You have boxes of hand-me-downs to mail me from Texas? I'm in. You want to help me drag my overwhelming luggage from the train, help me shovel out my buried car from snow, watch my heart while I race to the restroom with a not-quite-potty-trained child? Thank you. Thank you. I have swallowed pride, given up on precise reciprocity, and let others help. It is not easy for me.

I have learned, too, to ask for help. I've applied for financial aid for pre-school and for choir school. It killed me to do it, but I did it, because I knew that the benefits for my daughter far outweighed my embarrassment in working over tax returns and asking for aid. When all the girls in the neighborhood were already in car pools for choir and I couldn't get off work to drive her, I grew a backbone and asked a family with a nanny if they might be willing to let my daughter ride along.

I actually thought about all these things as the train hurtled through the starless night. It was the first long period of alone time that I'd had in ages. I remembered an earlier train trip back when I was a college chaplain—riding with a gaggle of students, laughing and crying and even praying together in the wee hours. I used to pray in binges, like that, skipping days and then spending an hour or more. I can't do that anymore, or more accurately, I don't want to.

Every day now is punctuated by tiny snippets, tiny wisps of steam rising. "Keep her safe," I pray 40 times a day, it seems. For I know that I'm not really a single parent in this regard. I may be the head of the household, but my heavenly creator has a guiding hand in my life that I will not come close to replicating. "Praise God," rises up regularly, too—with every new gasp of love, every lost tooth, every found friend—all shared

with the only other Parent in her life. The IRS calls me the Head of Household, but I know better. I'm not the head, not the life force. I'm the shepherd maybe, keeping my little family from self-destruction, the best I can with the help of a herd of others on my heels. Our family sticks out, but it's not that much different than any other family. We're all just doing what we can, brokering the deals we can with the leverage we can find, trusting God and each other, and holding the wee ones from the brink.

### Loving Families

Somewhere near the Ohio border, I got up to fill my water bottle. I passed rows of drowsing families of all kinds. There was a sweet-faced older couple whose gentle snores were in unison, a set of brothers in matching pajamas, piled like puppies on one bench. I passed a pairing of grandmother and grandson, and two shiny newlweds.

Right next to the water fountain was a family I had noticed earlier, an Amish family with four stair-step daughters and a son. The sisters were all asleep. The father was gone for the moment, but the mother was stretched out in her seat, holding her young son tightly around the waist, his face to the window, and her back turned to the aisle. His tiny body curved into hers, enjoying, in sleep, the protection she offered.

It's a pose I've struck a thousand times, in those nights when Selam cannot sleep, in those nights when the thunder rolls or the monsters threaten. In the fever times, the loud firecrackers outside times, the lonesome for something she cannot yet name times, we curl up together, with her small form tucked into the curve of my body, anchored by my arm.

We're a little family but a good family, and my arm is big enough, strong enough, just enough to hold her tight. 🌿

**Susan Olson**, a Teaching Elder (pastor) in the Presbyterian Church, USA, is assistant dean of students at Yale Divinity School.



# THE RED CORD



"Peace" (Rahab series) by Gwen Meharg, [www.drawneartogod.com](http://www.drawneartogod.com)



Scripture recounts the story of two spies sent by Joshua to scout and report on the defenses of the Canaanite city of Jericho (Joshua 2). The men enter the house of Rahab, whom most biblical interpreters believe was a prostitute. Learning of the spies' visit, Jericho's king orders Rahab to hand over the Israelites. Acting quickly, Rahab hides the spies beneath a large quantity of flax spread out on her roof. She admits that the Israelites had been in her house, but she misdirects the king's men, who depart in search of the Israelites. After the city gates are closed so the spies cannot leave, Rahab extracts a promise from them. In exchange for her help, they swear to save Rahab's household when the Israelites attack Jericho. The spies instruct her to hang a crimson cord in the window so they know which house to spare. She helps them exit through a window in the city walls, lowering them with a rope. Later, when Jericho is attacked, the Israelites keep their promise, saving Rahab and her family (Joshua 6:22–25).

Who was Rahab? Why did the spies visit her? Why did she lie to her king and betray the people of her own city? And what is the significance of the red cord?

### Rahab's profession

The story in Joshua 2 is spicy, with sexual innuendos, but we should be sensitive to the grim realities of prostitution. It is a degrading life that is emotionally and physically abusive. Normally prostitution is a last resort in cases of poverty, debt, or coercion.

In Hebrew, the Bible calls Rahab a *zonah*, a word used for prostitutes and sexually available women. The same word is used in Genesis 38, when the patriarch Judah sees a veiled woman (who is actually his daughter-in-law Tamar who wishes to conceive a child to perpetuate the family line). Judah thinks Tamar is a *zonah* and sleeps with her in exchange for his promise to give her a young goat from his flock. But scholars do not agree whether the term *always* means prostitute. It is possible that *zonah* was also used for female innkeepers and bartenders. Some Jewish sources, written centuries after the biblical events, remember Rahab as an innkeeper or landlord rather than a sex worker. Babylonian records found on ancient clay tablets indicate that women in the biblical world sometimes did own taverns and other businesses.

The episode about Rahab and the spies contains some double entendres suggesting that she was indeed a prostitute. In Joshua 2:3, the king orders Rahab to bring out “the men who have come to you.” In Hebrew, that phrase could be understood in a cruder, sexual sense. (Regardless of whether the spies engaged in sexual relations with Rahab, the king would have assumed they participated in this activity.)

Rahab's own name means “wide” or “broad” and could have the connotation of being sexually experienced—loose or easy. The word *Rahab* also relates to an ancient word referring to women's private parts. If she was a prostitute, “Rahab” may have been a nickname related to her profession.



Though prostitution was not considered an honorable occupation, it was not strictly forbidden in ancient Israel. Proverbs 6:26, instructing men to avoid liaisons with married women, says that “a prostitute’s fee is only a loaf of bread, but the wife of another stalks a man’s very life.” In other words (while not actually *advocating* relations with a prostitute), the proverb says that hiring a prostitute is preferable to adultery, which results in disgrace and murderous revenge from a jealous husband (Proverbs 6:32–35). In the biblical world—as in most places—prostitution was tolerated. Some of Israel’s neighbors collected taxes on prostitutes’ earnings. However, the apostle Paul, writing centuries later, insists on a stricter moral standard, forbidding sexual relations with prostitutes (1 Corinthians 6:15–17).

### Rahab’s profession of faith

What were the spies doing in Rahab’s house? Joshua had told them to explore the land and report back, providing details about Jericho’s weaknesses and defenses. But there is no indication that the spies got any farther than the city walls where Rahab’s establishment was located! Perhaps a house of prostitution or an inn was a good place to pick up intelligence and avoid notice, since the presence of strangers would not be unusual. However, the Bible is frank about people’s shortcomings and embarrassing behavior, including men’s visits to prostitutes (Genesis 38:12–19; Judges 11:1–2; Judges 16:1). Joshua 6:23 specifically refers to these spies as “young men.” They may have been more interested in sexual adventures than following Joshua’s orders. And Scripture frequently contrasts the faithlessness (and cluelessness) of Israelite men with the faithfulness and cleverness of outsiders and women. The author may intend the reader to wonder about the spies’ motives and competence, especially since the only intelligence they actually gather is Rahab’s statement that the Canaanites are afraid of the Israelites (Joshua 2:8–11 and 2:23–24).

If the Israelite spies are portrayed as somewhat incompetent, the men of Jericho are downright bumbling. Rahab lies to the king’s men, saying the two strangers had visited her but had already left (Joshua 2:4–6). The men believe her and set off on a futile pursuit to the Jordan River. Later she cleverly sent the spies off in a different direction, to hide in the hills of the country until the pursuers gave up their search (Joshua 2:16; 2:22–23).

It is noteworthy that Rahab gets the Israelites to circumvent and violate God’s commands. Earlier, in Exodus 23:32, God forbids the Israelites to enter into oaths and contracts with Canaanites. Deuteronomy 7:2 says: “Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.” Yet Rahab persuades the spies to swear a solemn oath to save her family and herself. She is a survivor who uses her wit and intelligence to take control of the situation. Rahab also makes a profound profession of faith in the God of Israel: “The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and the earth below” (Joshua 2:11). Rahab is a woman of cleverness *and* faith.

### The red cord

Even though some modern people associate the crimson cord hanging in Rahab’s window with “red light districts” of prostitution, it probably did not have that meaning in the ancient world. Sometimes the color red *was* associated with desirability. Song of Solomon 4:5 praises a woman saying, “Your lips are like a crimson thread.” But there is no evidence that red cords in windows signaled the presence of prostitutes. Instead, the cord is probably intended to remind us of the lambs’ blood placed on the Israelites’ doorways during the Passover (Exodus 12:12–13). Like the Israelite houses spared during the final Egyptian plague, Rahab’s house was marked and protected.

The crimson cord also reminds readers of the crimson thread placed around the wrist of one of the twin babies of Tamar (Genesis 38:27–30). Tamar, like

Rahab, had been labeled a *zonah*. Tamar, too, was a righteous Canaanite who used her own cleverness and initiative to help the people of God. In several ways, the stories of Rahab and Tamar are tied together and intertwined.

Where did the red cord come from? It is unlikely that the Israelite spies carried crimson cord on their mission. They probably spotted it in Rahab's house. Joshua 2:6 mentions that Rahab had a large quantity of flax spread out upon her roof. This is a clue about Rahab's other occupation: textile worker. Flax is a plant with fibers that are spun into linen thread with a spindle, to be woven into cloth. A traditional method of preparing flax was *retting*, spreading the flax on an outdoor surface to collect dew. Over the course of several weeks, moisture rots away the inner portion of the flax stalk so the outer fibers can be used for spinning.

The supply of flax on Rahab's roof could have been for household use, but it is more likely that Rahab earned an income from a variety of activities—sexual trade (or inn-keeping) and a cottage industry producing linen. Women in the ancient world constantly kept busy producing textiles. Rahab (and perhaps other textile workers at her house) may have spun linen thread when not occupied with customers.

Proverbs 31 praises the ideal “capable woman,” who “seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands” (31:13). The proverb continues: “She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle” (31:19). She takes care of her family, for “all her household are clothed in crimson” (31:21). The ideal woman in Proverbs is a businesswoman, making and selling women garments to support her family (31:24). In this way, Rahab is reminiscent of the industrious woman praised in Proverbs.

### Woman in the margins

Joshua 2:15 says that Rahab dwelt within the wall itself. If she was a prostitute, she would be metaphorically

marginalized by society, but she also lived literally “in the margins.” Whether her home was a brothel or an inn, she regularly dealt with strangers and outsiders. The people of Jericho would have seen her as a traitor for helping the Israelites. Ultimately, her loyalty was to her family. She was determined to help them survive. Interestingly, after she and her family are spared during the Israelite attack on Jericho, the spies set Rahab and her kindred “outside the camp of Israel” (Joshua 6:23). This suggests that, despite her assistance to the spies, she was not fully integrated into Israelite society.

### Remembering Rahab

In Jewish tradition, Rahab is often praised as the first “convert” to Judaism. She is also remembered as an ancestor of many prophets, including Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and the female prophet Huldah (mentioned in 2 Kings 22).

Rahab is named in the New Testament three times. The author of Hebrews (11:31) praises Rahab for her faith. James 2:25 praises her for her deeds. Matthew includes Rahab as one of only five women mentioned as ancestors of Jesus, in a list that includes more than three dozen men. Rahab is in the company of Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Jesus' mother Mary (Matthew 1:3–16). All, except Mary, are foreigners. Most of the women on Matthew's list had questionable reputations. (Matthew makes clear that Mary's child was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit, but those around her, would have considered Mary's pregnancy scandalous.) We might expect a genealogy asserting that Jesus is the Messiah to include the more reputable great-grandmothers of Jesus. But Rahab's story reminds us that God works in unexpected ways, through unexpected people. 🌸

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# RAHAB, A FAITHFUL BUSINESSWOMAN

by Kay Ward

IN GOOD COMPANY:  
STORIES OF BIBLICAL WOMEN

BIBLE STUDY : SESSION 9

## Theme verse

"Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death." Joshua 2:12-13

## Hymn

"The Right Hand of God" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 889)

## Overview

Rahab, a prostitute or possibly an innkeeper, protects two Israelite spies by hiding them on her roof, thereby gaining safety for her whole family in the battle of Jericho. She and her family become part of the people of Israel and the lineage of Jesus.

Throughout this Bible study, we have begun each session with a psalm. That was deliberate on my part because the psalms found in the Old Testament are the hymns of the Hebrew people and they have stood the test of time throughout the generations of the Christian church. I hope that you have learned a bit about the psalms in general so that when you read them for your own devotions or use them in your church, they might have more meaning for you. (There are some suggestions for using the psalms in worship and study in the Leader's Guide.)

A **rhetorical question** is a question that is asked in order to make a point and it does not require a reply. The question is used to encourage the listener or reader to consider a message and also to strengthen an argument.

## With a Psalm in Our Heart

### READ PSALM 27.

The first line of Psalm 27 has been used in works of choral music and may feel familiar to you. The first six verses express feelings of well-being. This is a hymn that we can sing in this post-Easter season. The psalm adopts a number of grammatical methods that intensify the meaning. Parallelism is a technique

that is often used in poetry to augment the meaning of words, making them mean more than they might mean separately. Parallelism is widely considered the essential basis of Hebrew poetry as phrases of similar meaning are piled on top of each other.

1. Parallel lines or clauses in this psalm begin with a statement which is followed by a rhetorical question. What are they?
2. There are also parallel lines that suggest an occurrence followed by another statement of faith. What are they?

Not only can the writer speak confidently of faith in the Lord, but the writer can also express the desire to dwell in the temple and worship there forever.

### 3. Of what does Psalm 27:4 remind you?

The temple was also regarded also a place of refuge and sanctuary, a function perhaps alluded to in verse 5. (See *The Art of Not Doing*,” p. 12.) The references to a tent and a high rock in verse 5 might recall the wanderings of the Hebrew people as a nomadic people when those elements offered safety. The last verse in this section, verse 6, is the promise of the faithful Hebrew, offering sacrifices with shouts of joy and song.

The psalm then shifts into the plea of the lost seeking the face of God. The writer can no longer recall God’s face or hear God’s voice. The psalm continues with the plea that God will guide the writer in right paths even in the midst of human troubles and threats, ending with words of assurance and confidence again.

### 4. What do you notice about the last two verses of Psalm 27?

Now that you are a good exegete, you will remember to look at the pronouns.

## Story from the Old Testament: Rahab

### READ JOSHUA 2:1–21.

We end our Bible study with Rahab, who is perhaps better known than many of the other women we have studied. Not only is she better known to modern readers, but those who wrote the faith narratives of the New Testament also knew of Rahab’s importance.

Rahab is remembered for what she did. Her story takes place as the Israelites are beginning to enter the Promised Land, Canaan, under the leadership of Joshua after the death of Moses. In the biblical account, we read that Jericho was a large, well-fortified city with thick walls, some say as much as 20 or 30 feet deep. Some fortified cities even had double walls with a large gap between the two sets of wall.

As part of the plan to attack the city, Joshua sent two spies to check out the city. The two spies arrived at the city and entered the house of the prostitute Rahab.

She lived on the wall of the city and her house was accessible to visitors. Some writers have speculated that she was an innkeeper. (See “The Red Cord,” p. 26.)

### 5. What can we guess about Rahab in these first two verses?

Some believe that “spent the night there” has sexual connotations. It would be difficult to think of Rahab as an innkeeper if you interpreted the phrase that way.

Apparently, the king of Jericho had a reliable spy system of his own, because the news came to him that Israelites had entered the city and were scoping out the place for attack. The king even knew which house the Israelite spies had entered, and he immediately sent messengers to Rahab’s house. At this point in the story, we don’t know why Rahab hid the men that had come to the house. But when the king’s messengers arrived at the door, she looked them squarely in the eye and admitted that the spies had been at the house but had left before dusk so that they could get out of the city before the gates would be closed. She urged the king’s men to hurry if they wanted to catch the spies.

### 6. We aren’t privy to how she could be so sure of these men or what to do to protect them. The texts don’t tell us, but is there anything about her position either a harlot or innkeeper that might have prepared her for this occasion?

### 7. Rahab took several risks in this story. Which do you think represented the most danger to her?

The king’s men, of course, chased after the spies, having been misled by Rahab. They went as far as the Jordan River—only a short distance—but it doesn’t appear that they crossed the river. However the king’s men pursued long enough for the spies to be dropped outside the walls of the city when the gates were shut.

The spies, of course, witnessed what had motivated Rahab to protect them. She knew about their God and



how God had promised the Israelites the land in which Jericho resided. She shared with the two men how frightened the inhabitants of Jericho were. They had heard the stories of how their God had saved the Israelites in the Red Sea and had heard of the annihilation of the Amorites. Bad news travels fast.

This is the turning point of the story and explains why Rahab acted so decisively and so courageously—as well as for self-preservation. Somehow, she had come to know the God of Israel. We don't know how that had happened, but her statement was a definitive one. We can only imagine what other conversations she might have had with these two Hebrew men. She certainly had bargaining power. She asked the two men to swear that they will protect her when the battle begins.

8. We are reminded again that Rahab is the head of a household. How many family members are mentioned that she includes in her household? (See "Head of Household," p. 22.)

The spies asked for her promise that she would not betray them if they would spare her household when they took over the land. It's hard to picture what her house could have looked like, but we do know that she had access to the outside of the city wall.

It is her outside window that she used to let the men down with a rope. She also gave them instructions on how to avoid their pursuers and return safely to

Joshua. Their last word to Rahab was that they would not be responsible for the survival of her family if she did not mark her house clearly and gather all her family inside the house and keep them there.

9. How is Rahab to mark her house so that they will be spared? What other event does this remind you of?

### A Story from the New Testament The Woman Accused of Adultery READ JOHN 8:1-11.

It is interesting to put this story in context, but it is a little more complicated because many early manuscripts do not include the story as part of the fourth gospel. The NRSV places brackets around the story, in fact.

There was a crowd of folks gathered, and the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who has been caught in adultery. The scribes and Pharisees knew the law. The religious officials assured Jesus that this woman had been caught in the act, but neglect to accuse the man (who, if she is unmarried, may not be guilty by some interpretations of the law). Adultery was punishable by death and that both parties should be put to death. The law also stated that they should be caught in the act. They reminded Jesus of the law which commanded them to stone such a woman, although Roman law did not permit the death penalty for adultery, perhaps a further test for Jesus in a Roman-occupied land. The scribes and Pharisees waited for his answer.

10. Do you remember who the scribes and Pharisees were? How might they be testing Jesus?

This passage is one of the most enigmatic texts in the Bible. Scholars and preachers and everyday readers have tried to imagine what Jesus was doing when he stooped down to write on the ground.

### The Bible Tells Us So—Extra Credit

READ MATTHEW 1:5, HEBREWS 11:31, AND JAMES 2:25 for references to Rahab in the New Testament. What is the significance of including Rahab in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew?

You may also want to read the end of the Jericho story. You probably know the song "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho." You will find that story in Joshua 6.

## 11. Before we go any further, what do you think Jesus wrote on the ground?

People have offered wildly different ideas for this action of Jesus. Some suggest that he was naming the law and the names of those accused. Others think that Jesus was kneeling to offer comfort to the woman (but the text says that she was standing in front of him). Some even say that he was doodling, though that seems unlikely. Others say that he was biding his time and still others are sure that he was naming the names of those bringing the woman forward.

The crowd kept pressing him for answers and so Jesus stood up and fired back a response that amounts to this: "You are ready to stone her, so let the one who has never sinned step forward to cast the first stone." When he knelt down again and wrote something else in the sand. It might make sense now if he is writing the names of those ready to stone the woman, but they didn't say another word. They just packed up their stones and left the woman with Jesus.

Jesus was being almost playful with the woman when all the others have left. Though he knew perfectly well that they had left, he asked the woman where they were, saying in effect: "Where are the ones who have accused you? Where are the ones who have condemned you? Nobody left to do that?" Jesus said, "I don't condemn you either." Just as the woman was turning to go, breathing a sigh of relief, Jesus added his parting word: "Don't sin anymore."

The words of Jesus had strings attached to them. He did not condemn the woman but neither did he let her think she was off the hook in the future. Some Christians take much of the fact that our forgiveness from God depends on our repentance. In this story, however, we

don't have any indication that the woman had repented of her sin. In fact, some might argue that she had just been used to test Jesus and didn't have to repent of the sin of adultery. Whoever she was and whatever she had done, she was a human being and she, like all of us, sinned. We are kin and in need of God's forgiveness.

### A Story from Today: A Story Teller

This Bible study has considered stories of women who lived in a different culture and time but they are still women that we recognize. We have come to know them well enough to be able to imagine parts of their lives. We live in them and they live in us. This is one of the reasons that we so enjoy reading the Bible. This Bible study has also included some stories of women from my life, many of them my relatives. I have had the privilege of telling you my stories.

So now it's your turn. This part of the last chapter of the Bible study will consist of a number of suggestions that might help you tell your own stories. If you read this when *Gather* comes to your mailbox before your meetings, you will have plenty of time to prepare.

As important as it is to tell our stories, it is equally important to have someone to listen. So think about whom you would like to share your stories with: your children, grandchildren, a niece or nephew, or a friend at church. Just writing the stories may be a satisfying way to tell your story. Here are three ideas about a place to start. (See "Living the Postscripts," p. 36.)

### Childhood Memory

Sometimes there are little snippets of our childhood that we carry with us that both explain something about who we are or define us in some way. Sometimes there are stories that happened when we were very

An **enigma** is something hard to understand or explain, inscrutable or mysterious.



small, and yet have been told over and over in our families. We grew up with (or in spite of) these stories.

## Names

We have become familiar with Deborah and Abigail and Rizpah. Names are important. I got used to calling the chapters by their name: “I have a little more work to do on Rizpah and I have a rewrite on Abigail.” So tell about your name. Who were you named after? Do you know the story about how your parents decided on your name? Have you ever wanted to change your name or have you changed your name? Do you know someone with your same name?

I was flying into the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania, and I grabbed my suitcase and headed for the car rental counter, where I had a car reserved for the weekend. I noticed a woman who headed in that direction from another flight, so I sped up a bit to get to the counter. Two young women stood behind the counter, waiting to help us. One agent spoke to the woman at my left, and the other agent asked me my name. I said, “Kay Ward.” The agent at my left snapped her head up to look at me when I spoke. She said, “What did you say your name was?” I repeated my name. Then she turned to her customer and asked, “What is your name?” In my hearing now, she said, “My name is Kay Ward.”

So there we were. Two Kay Wards standing at a car rental counter, arriving at the same time, coming from

different parts of the country on different airplanes. The other Kay Ward and I had a good time getting acquainted: Was this our real name? Birth or married name? Had this ever happened before? All the while, the rental agents tried to figure out the paperwork. The computers had produced two reservations with the name Kay Ward but with a mix of information and reservation data.

## Treasures

Most of us have a lot of stuff. “Stuff” is all around us in our living quarters—furniture, books, kitchen gadgets, dishes, clothing, linens—all very practical. We use these things to live our life. Then there is the other stuff. You know what I mean—the bric-a-brac, the white elephants, the gifts from others, and all the little treasures that make our house a home. They give it personality. I, for instance, have the blue bowl.

It was the day we took mom to her nursing home. We began sorting out her things in her apartment. It was clear that she would never go back to her apartment. My sister and I had braced ourselves for a very sad day. We started in the kitchen. A new set of dishes held no special memories. The glasses and cups got divided up. Then we got to the upper shelves. There was the blue bowl. My sister and I both sighed. There were very few meals I can remember when the blue bowl was not on the table. It held the canned vegetables at every supper. That was the way we experienced vegetables in the cold winters of Wisconsin: Del Monte green beans or Le Seur peas in the silver can, and often home-canned vegetables from the summer garden.

We solemnly carried the blue bowl into the living room where mom was going through pictures. We said, “Look Mom, the blue bowl.” She took it in her long, bony fingers and said, “You know, I never liked that bowl.” What had been heart-breaking just moments before was transformed when my sister and I broke into laughter.

## The Bible Tells Us So—Extra Credit

**READ JOHN 7:45–52** to get a flavor for the context of the woman caught in adultery. How does the story relate to these earlier verses? What do Leviticus 20:10, Deuteronomy 22:22–23, and Numbers 5:11–13 tell us about the Hebrew law and adultery?

Try writing a story about each of the suggested topics. I bet they will inspire you to write many more!

## The Work of our Hands

I can see the hands of Rahab carefully tying the red cord at the window, the hands of the woman brought in adultery perhaps preparing to protect herself, the hands of women holding their precious treasures. Above all, I can see the hands of Jesus writing in the sand. We sang “The Right Hand of God” at the beginning of our time together. Using our hands to do God’s work in this world is what we are called to.

## Praying Hands

In this last chapter, let us use our hands to pray once more. This time, use the finger of your writing hand and place it in the palm of the other hand. Maybe you can write some good intention or some regret and allow it to be read by God and then disappear.

- Take a few minutes before your prayer time to use this “finger-pointing” gesture. This is a gesture that recalls our story from the Gospel of John, reminding us of our sinful human natures and prompting us to open our eyes and hearts to see God’s handwriting on our hearts.

## Let us pray

Holy God, you have written your love and grace in our hearts. Help us to open our hearts and minds to see your holy hand at work, drawing us forward to mission. Help us to be willing to take the risk of loving those that are hard to love, to offer a hand up to those who are struggling, and to be bold in pointing the way to your goodness for those who are lost. In your Holy Name, Amen.

## Hands to Work and Hearts to God

- This is the time to look at our year together.

What do you bring to this last chapter from your Bible study work? Do you have a collection of journal entries? Take a few minutes and look back over your writing. What have you learned about yourself?

- How many of the prayer gestures do you remember from this year’s study? Some folks in the past have found it helpful to pray a kind of liturgy using each of the nine gestures, moving from one to the other prayerfully. Try this. Do you find it helpful? You can find them on the website at [www.gathermagazine.org](http://www.gathermagazine.org).
- As you think back over our study, which woman is the most memorable for you? How has that woman helped you to grow in your faith?

I am reluctant to finish this chapter. It is a good-bye. I am using the prayer gesture from the Daughter of Jephthah, the waving good-bye, as I think of each of the many of you that I have met in person or prayed with silently, miles apart. 🙏

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## Coming this summer

We're looking forward to "Of Many Generations," a three-session Bible study that looks at pivotal women from several generations, including Mary and Elizabeth and Lydia. This study will be in our June and July/August issues and will be presented at the Women of the ELCA North Central Gathering in Danville, N.C., by the author—Dr. Diane Jacobson, professor emerita of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. You can download it for free at [www.gathermagazine.org](http://www.gathermagazine.org).



# Living the Postscripts

by Martha Sterne



How did I love high school? Let me count the ways.

I loved the earnest, defeated voice of the principal—we called him “Dobber Jim.” I don’t know what that means but it was a time-allowed nickname. He would start off the day droning into the school speaker, “People, let me have your attention please. Let me have your attention, please.” Of course we never gave it to him, but the day was off to the races!

I loved the way the bell shrilled at 52 minutes after each hour and freed you for seven minutes of intrigue in the halls. I loved passing notes, usually folded into triangles, and unfolding them in my next class to learn who broke up, who was beginning to “like” somebody, who was wearing what, who could get their mama’s car and pick us up to “go to the library” that night.

I loved the danger of high school. The senior-class-mean-girls congregated in the second floor bathroom, smoking like chimneys, and (it was annually rumored) grabbing a sophomore girl foolish enough to stray into their lair and “flushing” them. I shuddered to imagine the scene. I know. This is sick, but I loved those kinds of legends.

I loved football Friday nights. I loved the smells of Friday nights. I loved the ancient rivalries, the crowd’s roars in the little stadium, the craggy, wise face of the coach,

the cockiness of the football players, the drama of the homecoming court, the adorableness of the cheerleaders. O, I longed to be a cheerleader, but couldn’t do a cartwheel to save my life.

I loved the knee socks, the short pleated skirts, the double dates, the girls’ nights when we didn’t have dates, even the pining for lost loves or boys yet to fall for us. And that’s it! I loved the ‘us-ness’ of high school. I bled Mustang royal blue and was proud to be a member of the herd of Murrah Mustangs, and then . . .

I wasn’t.

### High school reunions

I married an out-of-town boy and only came back to town to visit family. I did go to my 10th high school reunion. And all I can say about that is, “Don’t.”

Then the years just spiraled by, and, out of nowhere and kind of shocking myself, I went to my 45<sup>th</sup> reunion.

I guess I have not mentioned that this would be the 45<sup>th</sup> reunion of graduates from the high school in Jackson, Miss., portrayed in the movie and book, *The Help*. Yep. That school. In the 1960s. I graduated a few years after the troubled times Kathryn Stockett wrote about in her best-selling novel.

We were a big school—1,600 kids in all. My high school experi-

ence was very similar to that of the young White girls in the movie. Except for one thing: When I was in Murrah High School in Jackson, Miss., in 1965, schools were just beginning to be integrated.

Like I said, I have not kept up with people very well so I was nervous when I walked into the motel ball room for the 45<sup>th</sup> reunion. There were big nametags, which, as you may know, help immensely, and you drift through the crowd happy to see people whose names you recognize, and you connect. And that’s nice.

And sometimes you look into the eyes of someone you can’t quite identify, and there glimmering in their eyes, also seeing you behind your aging disguise, is belovedness. A deep friendship remembered with someone you had forgotten. Or maybe there behind the glasses and the wrinkles and the white hair is the love of your 10<sup>th</sup>-grade life.

Eight, 10 times this happened that evening—this charming recognition of old love made new and shimmering. It was very lovely and fine, and the kind of homegrown miracle I never expected, yet was hoping for.

Then I looked across the room, and I noticed an African American couple gliding through the crowd. That is something I did not expect and didn’t know to hope for. Turns out the woman was one of seven





Black students who enrolled at Murrah during my senior year.

Maybe you noticed that I didn't mention this when I began this article recounting all the ways I loved high school. The reason is because those Black students did not make it on my radar screen. Not really.

### **Turmoil and martyrdom**

Can you remember or can you go there in your mind to Mississippi in the school year 1965–66? James Meredith had entered Ole Miss amidst armed and howling crowds three falls earlier. Medgar Evers was gunned down in his front yard in our town two years earlier. Can you imagine living in the eye of the storm of freedom rides and marches and sit-ins and Citizen Council plottings and churches with greeting committees blocking the doors to God's house?

And martyrdom.

And now, can you picture a 17-year-old African American girl in the midst of all that? I don't imagine she thought of the traditions of our high school with the same affection I did. Instead she was called into the future "taking that first step" that Dr. King wrote about "when you can't see the whole staircase." Really, she took a first step for the whole state when she walked through the door of that school, for Murrah High School was truly the adolescent Mississippi Taj Mahal of White Us-ness.

So sure enough she and the other Black students took the first steps. Now picture them staying. Years later, I have pondered their witness—once I got my head out of my knee socks—the bubbles of isolation they moved in, the petty humiliations, the realistic fears for there were indeed budding terrorists among us. The courage it took to endure.

At the reunion, here it is 45 years later. And we talked. She had never, ever been to a Murrah reunion, which I had guessed. Why go back to that, to us? I told her she changed my life, which she did, though I certainly didn't know it then, so why would she?

I was just one of 1,500-plus White people whose actions toward her fell somewhere on the spectrum of polite indifference to attempting to make her miserable. I was not just politely indifferent; I was comatosely indifferent. My parents fought fiercely to keep the public schools open—very difficult—but I just missed the whole thing.

And my ministry has been, in many ways, a conscious atonement for that. For, yes, I finally understood Dr. King's sad truth: that it is the indifference of the good folk, the church folk, not the viciousness of evil people that stings the most.

### **Seeing beyond small**

I asked her about the details. Why did she consent to come to our school? And who helped her?

She said she did it for her mother, who was a member of one of the many brave Black churches in town that were praying and talking justice and teaching Paul's message that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint. She also told me

er mother was a central member of the NAACP and was part of the network of preparation, training, and support across the whole civil rights movement. The year she came to us, the NAACP had a Mississippi school desegregation strategy—get this—of sending first-graders and 12<sup>th</sup>-graders in as their front-line foot soldiers.

I think about the people who trained and supported her. They saw beyond our small world in Jackson. They saw the pain and injustice of our world without flinching. Then they looked beyond and could see justice and mercy flowing on up ahead like a mighty stream. So they organized the people of God to walk toward, flow into that mighty stream while holding onto Christ crucified and risen from the dead to a world redeemed. They could see a world already redeemed from sin and death.

Brenda—that's her name—works for the federal government—34 years—in some part of Social Security. And I said, "Oh, Social Security," having recently counteracted it for the first time. "Y'all are great and so helpful."

She grinned sheepishly, and she told me she was a "the not so popular part. I am in SSI (disability benefits), and we turn people down more than we wish we did."

So we nodded—because that's just the truth about SSI—and she asked what I did, and I told her, an Episcopal priest. By the way, there are three Episcopal clergy that came out of that class. I think we were haunted, and our church has the language and the liturgy and the God-given humanity to help haunted people.

### Postscript sacrifice

As we were parting she looked right at me and she said, "Really it wasn't just my mother. I knew. I myself knew, even at that age, it just wasn't right. I was over there at Lanier (the black high school) and we would get y'all's old

textbooks after you had torn them up. And that's not right. So when they asked me to go, I thought about it. I had played the clarinet all the way through in the band and had worked my way up to my senior year and had made majorette." And then she was silent.

Now take that teenage sacrifice and put it in universal human terms—this is a kid who in her senior year gave up being a Somebody, a big-shot, a majorette—to go and empty herself and sacrifice herself and be despised and rejected. Which in the mystery of God's work for the reconciliation of our broken, beautiful and sin-sick world leads to what?

I told this story to a retirement community in Atlanta. And a woman came up afterwards and said softly, "I wish you had added a P.S. My husband was the chancellor of the University of Mississippi from 1968 to 1984, and we worked hard to change things. A lot of people worked hard to change things."

A retired Episcopal priest stood next to her, and it turns out he had served in a parish in Mississippi that had integrated, and he said, "Yeah, I kind of wish you had added a P.S., too."

Since then, I have thought a lot about postscripts. As I told them, I hope they share their postscripts in more detail. For each of us live stories that are postscripts to other lives, and other postscripts will follow our stories as well. It helps to know that.

I am telling you my reunion story. I imagine I am a postscript to Brenda's reunion story. I like to think I am. I hope you will tell your stories, too.

There's no telling how many postscripts will emerge from them. ☸



**The Rev. Martha Sterne** is associate rector at Holy Innocents' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga. She is author of two books: *Earthly Good* and *Alive and Loose in the Ordinary*. She and her husband, Carroll, have two grown children and two grandchildren. The photos in this article are from her college yearbook. Martha's yearbook photo is to the left.





## World Malaria Day is April 25

and we are turning this day into a special week, focusing on the work of the ELCA Malaria Campaign in Namibia.

You and your congregation are invited to join millions of people around the world and thousands of ELCA members across the United States in the fight against malaria. Take a special offering for the ELCA Malaria Campaign's work in Namibia on Sunday, April 27, 2014.

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## GRACE NOTES

## Join the Conversation

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



you can learn more and register  
going to [www.welcatg.org](http://www.welcatg.org).

We'll soon be gathering in Charlotte, N.C., for the Women of the ELCA Ninth Triennial Gathering with its theme, **of many generations**. The generational pulls that this theme suggests got me thinking about my grandmothers and their influence in my life.

My paternal grandmother, Sophia Rosalia Young Post, was born in Philadelphia in 1893, the oldest child in her family. When her father's health flagged due to his work as a glassblower, the family moved to the Pocono Mountains for its clean air. Sophia was about 10 years old then, and she would spend the rest of her life in the Poconos. Born of strong German stock, Sophia was a determined woman, accomplishing much with few resources.

Sophia raised six children, managed the family farm and grew and canned vegetables and fruit—all the while running a boarding house for summer vacationers. At the same time, she found time for art and music. Sophia played the piano and served as the musician for her congregation for many years. Well into her eighth decade, Sophia played for worship services at a local chapel open each summer for worship.

Violet Blossom Goodson Johnson, my maternal grandmother, was born in North Point, Ark., in 1891. Because I lived in Pennsylvania, and Violet died when I was just 7, I don't have many personal memories of her. My mother told me many stories about her, though. Violet was an accomplished seamstress, sewing dresses for my mother and shirts for her three brothers. Violet quilted,

spun wool, tatted, and crocheted. My father raved about Violet's cooking. She was a devout woman. One of my older cousins who grew up near Violet says she remembers visiting Grandma, often finding her in a rocker with her Bible open on her lap, reading. I know that Violet was honored as a 50-year member of her Baptist Sunday school class.

Whether they knew it or not, these women planted seeds in me. I trace my love of fiber arts, music, and gardening back, in part, to both of them. Their faithful lives of service influenced me in my faith journey. Yet I wish I knew more about both of them. What were their dreams? How did they manage all that hard work and still find time for music and art and handwork? What experiences shaped their faith?

When we gather in Charlotte in July, we'll have the time and place to ask those questions of ourselves and of each other. Many generations of women will be present, and while we're not all related by blood, we are all related in the body of Christ. I envision the gathering as one big conversation, an inspiring and motivating conversation among women of many generations.

So join us in Charlotte! We'll share our joys and aspirations. We'll share our doubts and challenges. And together we'll dream new ways to live out our mission of acting boldly on faith in Jesus Christ. Won't you attend the gathering and add to the conversation? 🌿

**Linda Post Bushkofsky** is executive director of Women of the ELCA.





AMEN!

## Surprising God

by Catherine Malotky

### God, when I was little,

I heard the story about the fall of Jericho. I sang the song. I knew about blowing trumpets and marching. But I did not know about Rahab. That part of the story was saved for later, when I could better understand the subtleties of her role and the surprise of her legacy.

I am sometimes surprised by this history of faith. Most often, males are the center of the story, and it is about the things of men—war, conquest, inheritance, honor. Most often, women are background players, vessels for progeny, property of their menfolk, and followers.

But sometimes the story surprises me. Sometimes, women's stories are preserved, and we get to glimpse into the past and the contributions of women. Sometimes, the surprise is also about the kind of woman who gets remembered, and, surprisingly, revered.

God, what is it about these women that they get remembered? Most believe Rahab was a prostitute—not one whose story *we* would preserve. Such women live in the underbelly of our social world, surrounded by secrets and shame. We do not think of them as strategic and wise.

This is not the first time women with questionable resumes are active in the story of faith. Women were not thought to have resumes at all. But you, God, still chose them to work on your behalf. Rahab's story tells well because she is a woman of the night, used to keeping secrets and providing cover. Her occupational skills create a tension in the story that adds to the suspense, but it is

more. "The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below" (Joshua 2:11b). Perhaps she is just shrewd or afraid. But she makes this confession to the spies whose lives she chooses to protect. She believes.

Her faithfulness preserves the life of her own family, but it also creates a chink in the armor that lets the people of Israel prevail at Jericho, part of the long story of God's covenant played out on behalf of God's chosen people. For this, she is remembered. In the listing of Jesus' bloodlines, her name is among a few women included (Matthew 1:5). She is the mother of Boaz, the man who married Ruth, the foreign widow, when she left her homeland to care for her mother-in-law.

Why God, is Rahab in the story of your son's DNA? Why Tamar, the spurned daughter-in-law who tricked her father-in-law into impregnating her for the sake of a son to her dead husband's name (Matthew 1:3)? Why Bathsheba, the raped "wife of Uriah" (Matthew 1:6b)? Why Mary, the unwed mother (Matthew 1:16)? Most would, in shame, edit them out. You, God, preserve them.

Is your welcome so radical? How then shall it shape my own sense of propriety and righteousness?

God, let me see myself and others with your eyes, that I may be awed by your love. In Jesus' name. Amen. ☞

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky**, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropic adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader.



## OF MANY GENERATIONS

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*The multigenerational Café group from St. James Lutheran Church, Rock Island, Ill., meets regularly to discuss topics in Café ([boldcafe.org](http://boldcafe.org)). Photo by Elizabeth McBride*

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